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By-Ashley, L. F.

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Despite growing professional interest in the field of children's literature, adults provide few, if any, experiences to improve children's taste or enjoyment of books. A wide range of conflicting opinions exists concerning the wisdom of attempting in any way to guide children to read worthwhile books; and experts differ sharply with children over what constitutes good reading. Early in life, modern children come in contact with adult reading materials and television; they meet the challenges of sophisticated new approaches to mathematics and science; and they reflect a surprising catholicity of tastes in their listings of favorite authors. Yet they are being seriously underestimated by those responsible for purveying children's literature which is too often superficial or sub-literary. Further research is needed to determine exactly what children are reading and why they read it. (JB)

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James S. Stone, *Editor*
University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario

Ruth E. McConnell, *Associate Editor*
University of British Columbia, Vancouver 8, British Columbia

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Adults expect children to like books and to develop taste and judgment in their selection, and yet those same adults provide few, if any, experiences for children through which they may develop these desired qualities.
Louise T. Kirby, "International School," *Elementary English,* XLIV (October, 1967), 656.

Children's Literature Today

L. F. Ashley

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Children's Literature Today

One customary response of soldiers to the inscrutable dictates of upper echelons is the lament: "We don't know where we're going—but we're going." We might, with profit, ask ourselves "Whither away?" in regard to children's literature; for some of us, like the soldiery, are bewildered if not secretly pessimistic about the future. The reading needs and interests of young people were never so well catered for as thy are today, so well, indeed, that one might reasonably anticipate an eventual greater involvement of children in literature, with a concomitant rise in standards of taste and discrimination. Again, whatever the average Eng. Lit. guru might say to the contrary, literature for children has "come of age" as an area of serious study. The number of journals and periodicals devoting room to reviews and critical studies of children's books grows yearly—a happy condition paralleled by the increasing trend for critics of adult works to write without condescension about literature for the young. Moreover, commentaries about children's authors often take a fair share of space within the covers of such sophisticated products as *Horizon, New Yorker, New Statesman* and *Encounter,* and even *Playboy* has offered its devotees a study of comic heroes. But despite all this there is a surprising diversity of conflicting opinion—a sure sign of lack of direction.

There is, for example, a growing division of thought concerning the need—or wisdom—of guiding children into worthwhile books, a division represented on one side by a sort of Old Guard who pontificate: "No comics, no series books, no condensed classics" (hence, for many children "No anything"). Opposing them is the "let-'em-read-what-they-like" school of thought which appears to be gaining ground in our permissive times. Somewhere near, if not in Cloud Cuckooland, stand those who fervidly declaim that children desire only "the very best"—a somewhat unrealistic claim in view of the prevalence of TV-itis among young people. Then, again, there are those like Rosenheim[1] who consider that reading must entail more than mere uncritical pleasure, and Culpan[2] with the opinion that a taste for good books comes from "infection, encouragement, opportunity", and Huck[3] who feels that literature should permeate the whole of the curriculum. From yet another angle Homze[4] offers a selected bibliography concerning "problems of the eight-to-twelve-year-old child, classifying opportunities for therapeutic reading afforded by the books listed." (Bibliotherapy, it seems safe to say, is one use for books that was never envisaged by Defoe, Carroll, et al.)

Of all well-meaning but misguided efforts none has given rise to a greater wealth of invective than the business of controlled vocabulary readers—stepping tomes to nowhere, glutted glossaries, or in the words of Dr. Seuss himself, "fumigated word lists". The wonder is that Seuss managed to produce such intriguing books from pitiful word hoards and no doubt he would be the first to agree that a great part of his million dollars or so from sales of *The Cat in the Hat* and similar eccentricities derives from grateful second-childhood readers. Seuss admits to "forcing other writers" to work with restricted lists[5] because his success sparked what Jenkins has termed the "frenzy for easy reading material".[6] According to McGinley[7] controlled vocabulary is nobody's child, though one might suppose that it has certain relationships with Basic English (basic "language arts"?) programs devised to suit the needs of those taking English as a second language. Odd: for if we agree with Jenkins that through exposure to television and adult reading material children become familiar with more complex words and syntax

earlier in life than formerly, we might well conclude that reading of increased difficulty would be the order of the day. Odder still, when we think of the challenge inherent in contemporary approaches to science and mathematics in modern elementary schools—a challenge which many adults could not meet. And again, no child of our time or the foreseeable future will experience as long a childhood as did children of even two or three decades ago.[8] In truth, we should stop "underestimating young people and wasting their time on the superficial".[9]

'Superficial' is a mild term compared to some scathing comments levelled at the proliferation of books devoid of real literary merit—among others those dealing with 'ho-hum' aspects of human existence, the 'we-visit-the-supermarket' kind of offering. Wallace warns that "facts are crowding fancy off the shelves" and one is tempted to wonder whether facts and other "merchandise" will sometime blunt the palates of children so that taste and discrimination will forever disappear. If this seems incredible one only needs to compare children's periodicals today (can *you* name *three* worthwhile ones?) with the wealth available thirty years or so ago. This writer recalls two boys' magazines in particular which, while not remarkable for fine writing, did at least endow readers with a solid vocabulary and a taste for wider horizons in literature.[10] These magazines were liberally but not overtly permeated with apt quotations from almost all the great writers that come to mind—from Marcus Aurelius to Wordsworth, Milton, Shakespeare and the Bible—and yet had a peak circulation of some half-million copies. Children who scrape up pennies to buy favourite reading matter—and many did—are likely to be discriminating customers.

Today's current passion for the functional aspects of life—plumbing the depths of the Sargasso, do-it-yourself, how lasers (and phasers) work their miracles—is a major trend in children's literature that seems destined for a long stay and, perhaps, reflects one positive side of television. Since the (rare) National Geographic and similar TV presentations evoke shoals of enquiries for related reading matter it would appear that a "with it" librarian ought (besides watching the rarities) to anticipate demand by having "kits" piled high on library counters ready for the eager hands of young clients. Increasingly, many popular TV offerings are also available in printed form so that the reader has an opportunity to compare, or at least to digest sans commercials, the one version with the other. However, Rebecca West's statement that "the first injustice done to the modern child is the alternative to reading offered it by radio and television"[11] affords a timely reminder that a child totally involved in watching TV cannot pause for a fleeting moment to "live" with a favourite character or to experience vicariously excitement or adventure *at any desired point* in a presentation. The inexorable progress of *Gunsmoke* or *Bewitched* cannot be turned back like a filmstrip. Neither does television allow opportunities for day-dreaming—perhaps the largest indictment of the medium. Ours is the first period in which written literature has experienced competition from other media, and in view of some Disneyized versions of favourite tales it would appear that literature is being worked over with a vengeance.[12]

Another problem is the extent to which many students regard as definitive the tenets of writers and authorities in the field. In *Children and Books,* for instance, Arbuthnot deals cogently and lucidly with the reading needs of children—the need for security, for love, and so on. No one would deny that one vital part of reading is the satisfaction derived from vicarious experiences, but to assess reading primarily from

this angle, particularly when such experience is more vividly obtained through the mass media, is to negate the business of literature itself. For, in Townsend's words, if we are not careful we judge books according to prevailing social, moral and ethical climates of opinion, forgetting that the only true criterion in criticism is literary merit.[13] True, *Johnny Tremain* offers an excellent example of a boy triumphing over adversity, but the book itself is rather more than a case history, just as literature itself involves much more than opinions *about* books. And students (tomorrow's teachers) who imbibe uncritically from fountains of wisdom emitting great thoughts on children's books are likely to diverge more and more from *children's* views.

That the views of experts (with or without quotation marks) on children's reading and those of young readers themselves do not always coincide has been forcefully demonstrated by Norvell[14] and Epstein[15] and, one would hope, is being increasingly recognized by those concerned for children's literature. Still, one wonders. In a 1965 poll of publishers' editors Jenkins found that while such influences as librarians' and teachers' requests and comments, and availability of author-illustrators ("even a bad book by an established author is easier to sell than a new book") had an appreciable effect upon publishers' decisions to put out a given title, *children's* opinions appear not to be directly canvassed. On the other hand, the same poll revealed that cultural conditions—children's poor reading habits, the flood of poor quality material in supermarkets, and so on—often hinder responsible publishers from putting out as many worthwhile books as they might. And all things considered, it must be agreed that there *are* some very fine books available for discriminating readers. Yet Wallace reports that in 1963 only 40 to 50 books out of 2,600 new titles were considered to rate as "excellent to superb". How many of the rest, then, ought never to have achieved publication?

Excellence is assumed to be the criterion by which books are judged suitable for the yearly awards for distinguished material—the Newbery, Caldecott and other medals named for outstanding innovators in the world of children's books. The fact that each year sees its quota of award-winners duly filled might, to some, seem a little surprising, for surely not *every* year is worth marking with a white stone? And what might be thought of the selection sieve which allows to slip a book like *Charlotte's Web* (1954), the one book that immediately comes to mind when library shelves are scanned, for E. B. White's masterpiece is passed from hand to hand, from reader to reader, and seldom stays long enough on shelves to meet the eye. Although *Charlotte's Web* did not win any awards it has in less than fifteen years gained countless readers and is one book widely praised for originality and integrity. Of those which *have* won medals it seems odd that many do not appear more often in studies relating to children's reading interests and patterns. It would be heartening to see, now and then, on the Newbery and Caldecott lists the comment: "No awards were made this year". It would be even better if somehow the opinions of young readers could be directly sought when awards are under consideration.

In regard to studies of reading interests it is a great pity that no worthwhile body of information yet exists in Canadian sources. Canadian educators must refer to studies made in Britain and the U.S. From these we can indeed get some idea of what children below the border or across the sea like or dislike and we might think, philosophically, that children are the same everywhere—but are they? Is Vancouver the same as Portland or Manchester? Whatever the Canadian "identity" may or may not be, it most decidedly is not quite like the

American or British counterpart. We need more and more "home-produced" research in literature, as such, with greater opportunities for graduate studies, and perhaps less emphasis on research in reading which, by its nature, stresses the functional aspects of the skills. We need to take stock of developments in the provision of library services to children—particularly in view of two comments made to this writer: that the emphasis on attractive reading environments has badly detracted from attention to books, and more seriously, that many children today are spoiled for choice so far as library books are concerned.

In a study of peripheral influences on children's reading that this writer has currently under way, some 900 children of B.C. in grades 4 to 7 indicated their favourite authors in the following ranking order. (Numbers indicate relative popularity):

Carolyn Keene *(Nancy Drew* series books)	60
F. W. Dixon *(Hardy Boys* series)	58
Enid Blyton (very prolific writer)	38
C. Schultz	38
Mark Twain	24
Farley Mowat	20
L. M. Montgomery *(Anne of Green Gables)*	9
Jack London	5
Lewis Carroll	4
Robert McCloskey	3
Shakespeare	2
H. G. Wells	2
Daniel Defoe	1
Zane Grey	1
Kate Seredy	1

And then we have:

Ian Fleming (007 Bond)	14
Alfred Hitchcock	12
Walt Disney	5
Earl Stanley Gardner	2
Paul *(Reach for the Sky)* Brickhill	1
John Gunther	1
Nicholas Monsarrat *(Cruel Sea)*	1
Quentin Reynolds	1
William L. Shirer *(Rise and Fall of the Third Reich)*	1

The list reveals a catholicity of taste and a clear leaning towards adult books, borne out by the inclusion of two other writers:

Hugh Heffner	2
Lobsang Rampa (!)	1

Probably no other comment is needed other than the question: Do we, as teachers, sufficiently understand what and why children of the *1960's* read?

In our time the availability and range of reading materials for children are tremendous compared to what obtained a scant twenty years ago. Twenty years ago (and less) proper libraries for children in most schools of Canada were but dreams of the future, and less-

permissive parents and guardians rationed children's reading hours. "Early to bed . . ." has little meaning (or force) for most of today's youngsters, however, and whether they watch TV or read they certainly have access to tales and stories undreamt of by past generations of children. There is all the opportunity in the world for children to profit from literature and from a host of well-intentioned adults eager to proffer them advice and assistance. There are, indeed, terrific efforts being made on all sides—but are the results commensurate? . Not to this writer. Not when one considers that only five percent of American adults (and presumably of Canadians also) become confirmed readers.[16] Somehow, we are missing out somewhere.

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[3]Charlotte Huck, "Literature's Role in Language Development," *Childhood Education,* XLII (1965), 147-50.

[4]Alma Homze, "Children Face Themselves through Books: A Bibliography," *Elementary English,* XL (1964), 788-792.

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[6]W. A. Jenkins, "The Future of Children's Books," *Elementary English,* LXII (1965), 502-512.

[7]Phyllis McGinley, "Let's Stop Shortchanging Young Readers," *Reader's Digest,* April 1964, as condensed from *Glamour,* Sept. 1960.

[8]Penelope Mortimer, "Thoughts Concerning Children's Books," *New Statesman,* Nov. 11, 1966, p. 707.

[9]*Times Literary Supplement,* Nov. 30, 1967.

[10]*Magnet* and *Gem,* both of which ran for more than thirty years and in which the stories were largely written by one man, Charles Hamilton, under various pseudonyms.

[11]Rebecca West, "Freedom of the Shelves," *Times Literary Supplement,* August 15, 1958, p. 30.

[12]Rosemary Smith, "Walt Disney's *Mary Poppins,*" *Elementary English,* XLIV (1967), 29-31; Dewey Chambers, "The 'Disney Touch' and the Wonderful World of Children's Literature," *Elementary English,* XLIII (1966), 50-52.

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[14]G. W. Norvell, *What Boys and Girls Like to Read* (Morristown, N.J., Silver Burdett, 1958).

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[16]Gore Vidal, "French Letters: The Theory of the New Novel," *Encounter,* XXIX (December 1967), 13.